Patterns of Urban Differentiation in Hong Kong:  
a Reexamination of Shevky’s Theory of Urban Development

Since the Second World War, Hong Kong society has undergone large-scale social changes, primarily through the processes of industrialization, modernization and urbanization. These processes of social change have transformed what was a relatively homogeneous society into a heterogeneous society which is characterized by a high level of both functional and structural differentiation. The forms and directions of differentiation in the urbanized society of Hong Kong are of interest to both social scientists and policy-makers alike. To the social scientists, the patterns of urban differentiation in a modernizing society which is at the same time marked by colonialism and pluralism will be of importance in formulating theories of urban development in particular, or of social development in general. To the policy-maker, empirical findings on the patterns of urban differentiation in Hong Kong can be translated into a system of urban indicators, which will be useful in the measurement of urban social change, and in the social planning processes for the improvement of urban living conditions.

The purpose of this paper is to apply Shevky’s theory of urban development to the case of Hong Kong. Shevky’s theory is utilized here because of its importance in contemporary urban sociology and urban geography, and the wide support it has received from a host of empirical studies conducted primarily in the cities of the Western world. By applying Shevky’s social area analytic technique, we attempt to investigate three areas of substantial interest: (1) whether Hong Kong is a differentiated urban society; (2) if Hong Kong is a differentiated society, is the pattern of differentiation similar to that of Western cities, or whether Hong Kong shows a distinctive pattern of urban differentiation? (3) if Hong Kong demonstrates a different or slightly different pattern of urban differentiation, how are we going to reformulate Shevky’s theory of urban development? We hope to provide answers, however, tentative and preliminary, to these three problem-areas in this paper.

SHEVKY’S THEORY OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Shevky’s theory of urban development was presented in a precise form only after the methodological counterpart to the theory -- the social area analysis -- had been widely popularized. 1 Briefly, 2

social area analysis refers to the specific technique and theoretical elaboration developed by Eshref Shevky and his associates in their studies of Los Angeles and San Francisco commencing in the later 1940's. It seeks to relate the areal differentiation of American cities to basic societal changes. Three basic constructs are used in describing complex urban social structures in an industrial society. These constructs -- social rank (economic status), urbanization (family status), and segregation (ethnic status) -- are purported to represent the urban social consequence of a shift from a rural and/or preindustrial way of life to an advanced industrial society. For each of these constructs, an index was developed. Tract populations in urban areas are thus defined by their scores on these two (sic) indices. Tracts having high scores on the social rank index tend to have residents who are employed in white collar occupations, who have attained high levels of education, and who live in expensive housing. Conversely, low scoring tracts who are characterized by blue collar occupations and low rental and educational levels. The second index, urbanization, measure the population's stage in life cycle. High scoring tracts are dominated by families in the child-rearing stage, consequently having many young children and few women in the labour force and many single-family dwellings. Low scoring tracts have low rates of fertility, many working females, and high proportions of multiple-dwelling units. High scores on the third index, ethnic status, reflect strong concentrations of racial minorities while low scores define areas dominated by native-born white populations.

The theoretical justification for social area analysis owes a good deal to the ideas of Louis Wirth. Apparently, the concept of 'urbanization' is closely related to Wirth's idea of the decreasing importance of primary contacts within the city and the decreasing role of the family as a social unit. To this extent, 'urbanization' is somewhat similar to Durkheim's 'organic solidarity', Redfield's concept of 'urban' traits, or Toennie's gesellschaft. The question is whether such concepts developed at a societal level can be translated to meaningful differences within an urban area and whether Shevky's index of urbanization is an effective measure of such assumed differences. Evidently, Shevky's answer to this question is affirmative.

The main theme of Shevky's theory is that the city is both a product and a reflection of the structural arrangements and changing patterns of the larger society of which it is a part. In other words, the basic parameters of the larger society can be used to explain social organization and social change in the urban areas. Three such parameters can be identified, each a consequence of the increasing complexity and increasing scale of modern, industrialized societies:

1. Functional differentiation or division of labor -- specialization of occupations and the expansion of occupational categories would result in a hierarchical ranking of occupational groups according to levels of skill, education, income and prestige. This form of structural change can be measured by the construct of 'social rank'.

2. Changes in the structure of economic production -- the process of industrialization and the nature of industrial production lead to a separation of home and work, both spatially and functionally, hence resulting in a transformation of the lifestyle of the populace. Alternative family patterns emerge and women enter the labor force. This structural change in the social system is represented by the construct of 'urbanization'.

3. Changes in the profile of the population -- increasing mobility and diversity of the population are followed by territorial redistribution, isolation and segregation of subgroups in society. The resulting pattern is captured by the construct 'racial segregation'.